

## FOR YOUR INFORMATION ¶

March 18, 2013| By: ¶ [Katrina Lantos Swett](#) ¶ and ¶ [M. Zuhdi Jasser](#)

The following op-ed appeared in [Roll Call](#) on March 15, 2013.

While the world remains riveted to Egypt's challenges and Syria's travails, much is also at stake in Bahrain, a strategically vital Gulf nation that is home to the Middle East's largest U.S. naval base.

Compared to other countries in the region, Bahrain has displayed remarkable tolerance toward its non-Muslim religious minorities, from Baha'is to Christians. Nonetheless, Bahrain has been repressing its Shiite Muslim majority.

Last month marked the second anniversary of Shiite protesters rising up and demanding political reform and an end to the Sunni-led government's discrimination. Recently, the government proposed dialogue with the opposition. For both human rights and global security reasons, it's time for real dialogue leading to genuine reform.

In December, we led a delegation to Bahrain from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which we serve. Our aim was to assess religious freedom conditions, particularly the government's response to recommendations from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. Bahrain's government had created BICI in June 2011 following clashes triggering dozens of deaths and property destruction including the demolition of Shiite mosques and other structures. We met with Bahraini officials, opposition heads, Sunni and Shiite religious leaders, human rights and non-Muslim religious minority representatives, and ordinary Bahrainis.

Our findings support a number of BICI conclusions. While the government understands the need for dialogue, it remains reluctant to embrace lasting reform.

We heard two competing narratives while in Bahrain. The government insisted that Shiite activists are collaborating with Iran to unleash chaos, while the Shiites alleged that the government of Bahrain has committed escalating human rights abuses since 2011 and, with Saudi Arabia's support, has rejected reform.

We saw no evidence that Iran was behind the protests or that the Saudis were driving the government's actions. Instead, we found that Bahrain's problems are homegrown. We saw a pattern of religious bias against Shiites, clear human rights and religious freedom abuses against them after the 2011 protests, and a reluctance to accept full responsibility for the discrimination or the abuses.

The Bahraini government's deep-seated suspicion of Shiite citizens is evident in its governing system. Shiites routinely are prevented from serving in military combat positions, and there are no senior-level Shiites in Bahrain's security apparatus, including the military and police.

While some security forces were killed or injured in the 2011 demonstrations, the government's response further damaged relations. It dismissed Shiite students from universities and government workers from jobs because of their involvement in the protests. It demolished at least 35 Shiite mosques and religious structures within weeks, some of which had stood for decades. It allowed state-controlled media to denigrate Shiite citizens. It reportedly tortured Shiite demonstrators, subjecting some to physical beatings and electric shock, forcing some to stand for hours at a time, and even dousing detainees with urine.

Since that time, we've found no indication that the government is critically reviewing its actions and systematically reducing its bias.

While the government has acknowledged the destruction of religious structures and has begun rebuilding, it has not publicly taken responsibility or apologized. Its rebuilding schedule remains unclear.

Only a handful of low-level police officers have been convicted of mistreating detainees during the 2011 uprising. The lack of transparency surrounding these convictions casts doubt on whether the guilty are serving jail time. Meanwhile, human rights activists such as Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Nabeel Rajab remain imprisoned.

In January, 13 Shiite political activists' sentences were upheld. They had been convicted of dubious charges such as conspiring to overthrow the government, all of which the UN and human rights groups have deemed unfair and politically motivated.

Bahrain's government harms itself and its people by violating human rights and religious freedom. Every day it continues, Bahrain moves closer to what it fears the most: rising sectarian violence leading to the country's unraveling — it is, in essence, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As studies have shown, societies where religious freedom is violated are less stable and secure.

Bahrain's activist prisoners provide a human face to what is happening. We must not forget them, and Congress has taken steps to keep them front and center. As part of the Defending Freedoms Project — an initiative launched by Reps. [Frank R. Wolf](#), R-Va., and [Jim McGovern](#), D-Mass., of the House's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in conjunction with USCIRF

and Amnesty International USA — McGovern selected Rajab as one of its first prisoners of conscience. He did this to spotlight Rajab's case and what is occurring in Bahrain. Congress should stand as one with Rajab and others like him.

Let the message to Bahrain be this: Embrace true dialogue and demonstrable reform while there is still time.

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